

## TESTIMONY OF THE HONORABLE PETER V.R. FRANCHOT

Hearing of the House Committee on Government Reform:  
*"Out at Home: Why Most Nats Fans Can't See Their Team on TV."*  
April 7, 2006

Good afternoon, Chairman Davis and members of the Committee. My name is Peter Franchot, and I currently serve in the Maryland House of Delegates from the 20<sup>th</sup> Legislative District, which includes vibrant and diverse communities such as Silver Spring, Takoma Park and Wheaton. It is a privilege to come before you today and speak to an issue that has become a source of anger, resentment and mistrust for households throughout my district and across this entire region.

Like so many of you in this room today, I will never forget the day in September of 2004 when Mayor Anthony Williams announced that, after 33 long years, Major League Baseball was coming back to Washington, DC. As a longtime fan of the Baltimore Orioles, I can still recall my excitement at the prospect of a vigorous but friendly rivalry between the two teams – a rivalry that would reinforce feelings of civic pride in both areas while increasing fan interest in our National Pastime. I anticipated summer evenings with my wife and kids at both Camden Yards and RFK Stadium. Perhaps most of all, I looked forward to ending a long day by relaxing in my favorite easy chair, with my beverage of choice, and catching parts of both games on television.

I think that most of us would agree that our new home team, the Washington Nationals, has exceeded the wildest dreams of baseball fans throughout this region. Those of us who were there will never forget the Summer of 2005 when, night after night, Livan Hernandez, John Patterson, Nick Johnson and Chad Cordero turned RFK Stadium into a rollicking block party. More than 2.7 million fans turned out to see a team they really didn't know, one which played in an aging and outdated stadium with very few of the amenities that are taken for granted at other ballparks. The excitement generated by this new team and their adoptive fans eliminated any doubt that this region will be a strong and stable baseball market.

Unfortunately, though, my dream of relaxing in that easy chair and watching the Nationals on television never came to pass. Because of an arcane dispute between Comcast and Peter Angelos' new Mid-Atlantic Sports Network (MASN), the 1.3 million Comcast subscribers in the Washington metropolitan region were unable to watch their new favorite team in action.

Think about that for a minute. Fans that had been waiting for the return of baseball *since Richard Nixon's first term* were unable to watch their new Major League Baseball team on cable television. On any given night, they could watch the Orioles, Braves,

Cubs or White Sox, but they had to pull out the trusty old radios or put a satellite dish on their rooftops to watch a team that played just a few Metro stops away.

I must wonder what would happen if Yankees games were taken off the air in New York. Speculate, for a moment, what the response would be from fans across New England who suddenly had to listen to the Red Sox on an FM station, or Cardinals fans across the Midwest who were forced to follow Scott Rolen on an Internet "game cast." I think we all know that such scenarios would never occur in proud baseball cities such as those. The fans, after all, would never settle for it.

If an injustice of this magnitude would be unacceptable for fans in New York or St. Louis, why is it acceptable for the fans of the Washington region? When did it become permissible to treat baseball fans in, and around, the Nation's Capital like second-class citizens? What message does this send to the 2.7 million fans who rallied around this team during that unforgettable Summer of 2005 and want to pass that unconditional love of the game down to their children and grandchildren?

It is in that spirit of exasperation that I ask Comcast and Mr. Angelos to put down their swords, dismiss the conversation about who is right and who is wrong in this matter, and negotiate a compromise on behalf of the public interest. The goodwill of our fans, the hard-earned civic reputations of both parties involved and even the basic integrity of the game rests in the balance.

It is my belief that Major League Baseball's treatment of the Washington Nationals franchise has been an insult to its fans, and has placed yet another unnecessary stain on the integrity of the National Pastime. I cannot think of another instance in American sports where one team's television rights -- its largest and most dependable source of equity -- have been granted to a rival owner. Regardless of whatever honest intentions might exist, a situation like this will naturally and inevitably lead to a conflict of interest, with the fans ultimately getting shortchanged.

Mr. Chairman, it is truly a shame that we must come here today as the voice of an aggrieved franchise and its frustrated fans. However, this responsibility falls upon us as a result of another injustice that has been perpetrated by Major League Baseball. Nearly a week into the Nationals' second season, this team still is not owned by an independent investor or partnership, but by the other 29 teams in Major League Baseball. This, despite the fact that Mayor Williams and the D.C. Council have approved a \$611 million stadium financing plan, and that several groups of private investors have been willing for months to spend \$450 million to purchase the team and invest in its long-term competitiveness.

As a result of its colonization, the Nationals do not have the resources to attract the best talent on the free market, or even hold onto its best players. They do not have a group

of vested stakeholders that are committed to creative and aggressive marketing of the team, and the Nationals do not even have a leader that can come before Congress and fight to get their games put on television. I would ask those officials of Major League Baseball who are present today to inform the members of this Committee when we can expect a new owner to be announced for the Washington Nationals. Considering the time that has already lapsed – and the numerous delays we have already experienced -- I believe that anything less than a firm date on this matter is inexcusable.

It is my hope that this timely hearing is the first step toward the end of this inexcusable television blackout. After more than a year of turning the antenna on my deck radio to catch a few innings of Charlie Slowes, I still look forward to that day when I can to enjoy a Nats game in the comfort of my easy chair. It is one of the simplest and most timeless joys of an American summer, and there are thousands of families throughout this region who share that same dream. I thank you for this opportunity to testify, and for your consideration.

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